

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
9 August 1985

Monitor reporter's notes, files, tapes seized by Soviets

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Leningrad

My return to the Soviet Union took its first unexpected turn when the ferry from Stockholm was diverted to an isolated pier in the Port of Leningrad.

A fisheries exhibition in Leningrad Harbor prompted the diversion, I was told by officials. But awaiting the Soviet ferry were two truckloads of uniformed border guards of the Soviet secret police (the KGB) and customs officials.

These Soviet officials detained me on the pier for three hours, searching the Monitor car and all my luggage and effects. Eventually they confiscated notes, files, and tape recordings I had taken with me to Finland to cover the commemoration of the Helsinki accords last week. Ironically, the confiscation was a clear violation of those accords, signed a decade ago by 35 states including the Soviet Union.

While being detained, I repeatedly identified myself as an American correspondent, and produced an identification card indicating I was accredited by the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And as they conducted their search, the customs and KGB officials referred to me as "the journalist."

But the officials refused to return the seized material, including some 125 pages of documents, two tape recordings, and magazines and books. They declared the items were "anti-Soviet."

Among the materials confiscated were notes regarding alleged Soviet human-rights abuses, persecution of religious activists, and reference material on Soviet political prisoners.

The officials even seized dispatches by the official Soviet news agency Tass, because they made reference to the United States Central Intelligence Agency. Tass reports are widely reprinted in Soviet newspapers. Nevertheless, border guards insisted they had to be closely examined for "anti-Soviet" content.

One tape contained a previously recorded interview with Yuri Balovlenkov, a Soviet citizen who recently ended a hunger strike. He was protesting the refusal of Soviet authorities to allow him to live in the US with his American wife and two children.

The other was a recording of a press conference given in Helsinki by Avital Shcharansky, wife of imprisoned Jewish dissident Anatoly Shcharansky. I had used both tapes for reference in the preparation of stories that I wrote for the Monitor while attending the anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki accords in the Finnish capital.

Officials conducting the search initially insisted that the only things confiscated were the two tape recordings and one copy each of Time and Newsweek magazines. But I noticed one official attempting to stuff a sheaf of

papers into a valise and recognized some of the material from my own files.

After being challenged, the official admitted that he had taken 125 pages of documents from my luggage. He refused to allow the material to be inventoried or numbered. When I asked for access to a telephone in order to contact the US consulate in Leningrad, the officials hastily departed, leaving my luggage, personal effects, and files strewn over the pier.

Before departing, however, the officials gave me a receipt for the seized material and said the documents could be picked up in "three or four days," unless they were still found to be "anti-Soviet." Informed sources say there is little doubt the material would be duplicated before being returned, if it is returned at all.

The Helsinki Final Act, signed by the late Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev on Aug. 1, 1975, pledges the states that signed it to "facilitate the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds . . . and to improve the conditions under which journalists from one participating state exercise their profession in another. . . ." The US has also signed the Helsinki Final Act.

The Final Act also pledges the countries which signed it to "facilitate the improvement of the dissemination, on their territory, of newspapers and printed publication . . . from the other participating states." During the anniversary ceremonies in Helsinki, Soviet authorities insisted that they complied with all provisions of the agreement.

However, the authorities at Leningrad told me that Time and Newsweek are "prohibited" in the Soviet Union and seized a copy of each of them.

I repeatedly cited the Helsinki Final Act in attempting to prevent the confiscation of my material. I was told that the act did not apply to "anti-Soviet" materials, and that only Soviet authorities can decide what is "anti-Soviet."

One Western diplomat who was told of the incident said, "I don't think there's any doubt that it's a violation of the Helsinki Final Act."

Soviet authorities routinely praise the uniformed KGB border guards for their "vigilance" in halting suspect literature — not to mention people — at the country's borders. The Leningrad detachment came in for special praise in the July 10 edition of Leningradskaya Pravda, the official Communist Party newspaper here.

Leningrad has also earned a reputation as one of the most difficult Soviet cities for foreigners to visit, despite its architectural splendor and undeniable charm.

Incidents against US citizens, some including physical assaults, involved tourists and diplomats. But the action against me is believed to be the first time in recent years that a journalist's notes have been taken. And it is the latest in what one well-informed source calls a "spate" of incidents involving Americans in Leningrad.

A US consular official, Ronald Harms, was beaten by unknown assailants in downtown Leningrad in April 1984. Official complicity was widely suspected, and the State Department protested to Soviet authorities.

Last year a student studying Russian here was also assaulted, allegedly after meeting with Soviet dissidents.

These incidents, along with others, prompted repeated US State Department protests to Soviet authorities. And the refusal of Soviet authorities to allow US citizens to

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